

Chapter 6

The Resettled Bedouin Woman

He who collects more wives begets more men
—Clinton Bailey, *A Culture of Desert Survival:
Bedouin Proverbs from Sinai and the Negev*

As the previous chapter has shown, resettlement has fostered a variety of social changes in Negev bedouin life, manifested within a nexus of mechanisms through which new bedouin identity/identities formulations have begun to emerge. Much of the rapid change associated with the resettlement initiative also has been manifested through the socially and politically contested environment of gender relations and role change. In previous studies (Dinero 1997; 2006), I have analyzed these evolving gender roles in the Negev bedouin community as well as the changing role of marital dynamics, most especially as seen in the rise in polygynous marriage. In this chapter, I strengthen this argument considerably with additional analysis, using quantitative and qualitative data gathered in Segev Shalom in 2007 through both the household survey and a series of Bedouin Womens' Focus Groups (BWFG) developed for this aspect of the study, seeking to define, measure, and further explain these ever-changing and evolving gender dynamics.

What is clear from this material is that, although the role of the woman in the Negev at the end of the research period had shifted markedly in virtually every aspect of social life (home life, educational opportunity, political involvement) since this project began in 1992, the idea of a "women's rights" agenda on the Western model is limited in bedouin society today. The control of women, their spaces, activities, behaviors, and basic freedoms, remains as yet a primary arena through which political resistance to the state's mechanisms of power may yet freely be exercised. Thus, one may question whether such resistance, contested over gendered space, can successfully serve to empower bedouin society as a whole if women's rights are to be sacrificed in the process.

The “Traditional” Nomadic Bedouin Woman

The “traditional” roles of bedouin women have been discussed at length elsewhere (Jakubowska 1988; Fenster 1996; Dinero 1997) and thus, I do not wish to repeat that material here. However, it is necessary to provide some background that will help then to contextualize the nature of gender role change in the resettled communities of early twenty-first century Negev bedouin society.

As discussed at greater length in my previous work (1997), for example, Negev bedouin women historically performed a number of difficult and physically demanding functions (Illustration 6.1) prior to resettlement and urbanization (Marx 1967: 83–84). They helped to build the tent and kept it in order, brought water, fetched wood, prepared food, and carried out a variety of domestic activities.

But, of course, the primary role of the bedouin woman was that of being the biological and cultural reproducer. A central responsibility of the bedouin woman was that of bearing children to add to the labor pool, and her prestige and status was elevated with each birth of a child, most especially, sons (Kressel 1992: 39; Marx 1967: 138). From early childhood, girls were socialized in preparation for the time when they, like their mothers, would marry and continue with this cyclical reproductive process.



Illustration 6.1. Bedouin Women’s “Traditional” Roles—Milking a sheep.

Source: Photo by Steven C. Dinero.

The value of children in traditional bedouin society was based upon economic, material, and non-material rewards (Meir & Ben-David 1993: 138). Economically, human reproduction in nomadic communities is rational, as a family seeks to “perpetuate itself by maximizing fertility” (Meir 1987: 204). A numeric balance between the number of flocks a family held and the number of children a family bore (Meir 1997: 33) further supported the contention that fertility behaviors among the bedouin were linked directly to their pastoral nomadic lifestyle and labor force needs.

In addition to providing a labor force to meet present demands, children also served as one’s “social security” system upon reaching old age. Bearing children had normative value as well, as a sign of submission to the will of Allah (that is, based on theistic values), and to answer tribal or extended family pressures that are culturally encouraged (Meir & Ben-David 1993: 143–144).

While it is apparent that gender power relations within traditional bedouin society favored males, women in the Negev did lay claim to levels of power and status. This power, however, was primarily exercised domestically within the family unit, and not in the external communal sphere. Some have argued that bedouin women are largely powerless politically and are “marginalized” from the spheres of political power (Marteu 2005: 279). And yet, it is my contention that women have always exercised considerable power, but that this internal strength can be measured through a variety of ascriptive status indices (Dinero 1997: 249–250).

Marriage and the dynamics within a marriage were all components that directly impacted the female realm in pre-sedentarized bedouin society. Just prior to settlement, Marx documented these complex marriage dynamics, through which economic and political power were distributed and exercised as tribal sheikhs vied with one another to increase family size, position, and control of regional area and resources, both in relation to other tribes, as well as in response to the increasing strength of the Military Administration (Marx 1967: 138–141). Further, the mechanisms of “shame” and “honor” were ideally suited to the management, control, and social organization of bedouin society. Girls were socialized not to show any knowledge or interest in sexuality and were secluded from the male realm to the fullest degree possible (Marx 1967: 104), for example; moreover, mothers played a central role in teaching their daughters these strategies for protecting themselves from “shame”—which, when carried to its natural outcome in bedouin society, could in extreme cases even occasion death (Kressel 1992: 43).

Overall, it can be said then that from a popular bedouin legal perspective (that is, not according to *shariah* Islamic law necessarily, but within the rules of bedouin communal law), women’s positions were not to be viewed

as subordinate (Dinero 1997). Still, the ability to seek redress in the *shariah* courts (seeking help with divorce matters, protection from abusive husbands, applying to obtain property upon a father's or husband's death) is a benefit that settled bedouin women did not previously enjoy (Layish 1984: 46). Thus, the literature is clear in emphasizing that women were rarely able to act independently in terms of their reliance upon men. For the most part, their strength and position in bedouin society stemmed from the support system that they provided as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives.

As the bedouin have been resettled, however, the displacement of this power has shifted, as the genders contest for control over women's bodies and their reproductive capacities. While one major outcome has occurred—the changing role of education among bedouin women has significant bearing upon employment—these developments are in part mitigated by ways in which bedouin women's lives are changing and evolving in the areas of marriage and their freedom of movement and seclusion in the planned town environment.

The Resettled Bedouin Woman 1992–2007— Changing Roles, Changing Futures

As Jakubowska (1988) noted decades ago, the evolving development of an increased desire for social control over women's lives in the Negev bedouin towns appeared to be due to a perceived need to counteract women's closer proximity to non-agnatic males (that is, males who are not close relatives). And yet, what I contended in my more recent work (1997) and what appears to be gaining momentum at the millennium is that a lost sense of continuity and tradition *outside* of the home brought on by the forced resettlement initiative is lending to greater desire for control and the maintenance of traditional behaviors and practices *within* the home.

For example, as I noted previously, “while men's lives are increasingly impacted by external interactions, the division of realms (domestic sphere/external sphere) based upon gender and age persists, and seclusion and social restrictions on women remain largely in place” (1997: 254). *Haram* (Arabic: the separation of women and men through forbidden spaces, places, and acts therein) is strongly emphasized in order to ensure marriage with other agnates; separation is particularly strong in urbanized bedouin society, where it seeks to further a continuity of traditional gender roles (see Kressel 1992: 31–35) and the perpetuation of family alliances through marriage ties. Moreover, issues of honor and shame have been seen to take on even greater importance among those Arab groups who remained within Israel's borders following their military defeat and the creation of the Jewish State,

which are manifested by the desire to “preserve the symbols of manhood” by exercising control over female family members’ *ird* (Arabic: chastity/honor; see Shokeid 1993: 435).

Meir concurs, arguing that sedentarization has led to the further seclusion of women, more so than was the case in the nomadic environment (1997: 43). Thus, it is his contention that the social position of women has “deteriorated considerably” as a consequence of the sedentarization initiative (Meir 1997: 161).

“Middle aged” women have particular difficulties in adjusting to urban life (Degen 2000). While older women tend to retain traditional behaviors in the towns (Illustration 6.2) and strive to live as they once did in the tent environment (raising/managing livestock, making food products, etc.; Degen 2000: 110), those aged 20–40 tend to be caught up in the challenges of negotiating through and between the different milieus in which they must bridge the generational, spatial, and cultural divisions that separate their mothers, children, husbands, and friends.

While the very causes of the stresses now being placed upon bedouin women can easily be traced to the changes brought on by the sedentarization initiative, it is within the urbanized context that social welfare services have been developed to address the newly arising needs of today’s bedouin, especially bedouin women. Such services, social workers explain, at one time followed a more “Western, feminist model,” which failed to consider



Illustration 6.2. Baking Pita on the Patio of the Villa.

Source: Photo by Steven C. Dinero.

the true-life circumstances and experiences so many bedouin women were undergoing. These programs have since been redeveloped in order to better include “the family, the tradition ... those who are most influential among the men in the family, perhaps the sheikhs. The women don't have the life experience to operate on their own, so we have to work within the extended family to help them” (Goren, 7 May 2007).

Awareness and use of the social services designed to help address these concerns is predicted by education, and it is the women of the towns who are the most educated (El-Krenawi 2004: 53, 61). According to El-Krenawi, women in the planned towns use healthcare services more often and regularly than women in the *pezurah* (2004: 46). Such correlations were found to be true in Segev Shalom as well and are part of a larger picture of the manifest changes and developments now taking place among resettled Negev bedouin women.

As Figure 6.1 reveals, while literacy rates among men have obviously risen, the rate of female literacy has risen to a far greater extent and is now nearly equal to that of men. As suggested in Chapter 4, education is a primary indicator of female empowerment in Negev bedouin society. Abu-Rabia-Queder, the first bedouin woman to receive a Ph.D., has argued (2006) that educational opportunity for bedouin women is not equal to that offered to men, insofar as women are expected to attend gender-mixed institutions while also protecting their honor and reputations. Given this virtually impossible challenge, many simply drop out before reaching graduation. Thus, she contends, the “modern state offered Bedouins [sic] an education as part of the modernization process, [but] it did little to consider the needs of the women or the community's traditional values” (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2006: 14).

There is no question that, from the outset, the state has done little to consider the specific concerns or needs of the bedouin community within the context of its planning initiative. And yet, all statistics suggest that bedouin women are accessing the accoutrements of “modernity,” (to use Abu-Rabia-Queder's terminology) at heretofore unseen and perhaps unanticipated levels (Figure 6.2). Employment outside of the home follows a similar pattern to changes in access to formal education and literacy. At one time, bedouin women rarely if ever worked outside of the home, and few if any drove an automobile, further limiting their mobility. By 2007, however, this situation had changed considerably, and employment rates for women had skyrocketed, while male rates remained virtually unchanged (Figure 6.3).

That said, a number of distinctions found in the 2007 data must still be noted concerning the differences found within Segev Shalom, and throughout bedouin society, as the resettlement initiative and its various impacts take root. With regard to education, for example, especially among those

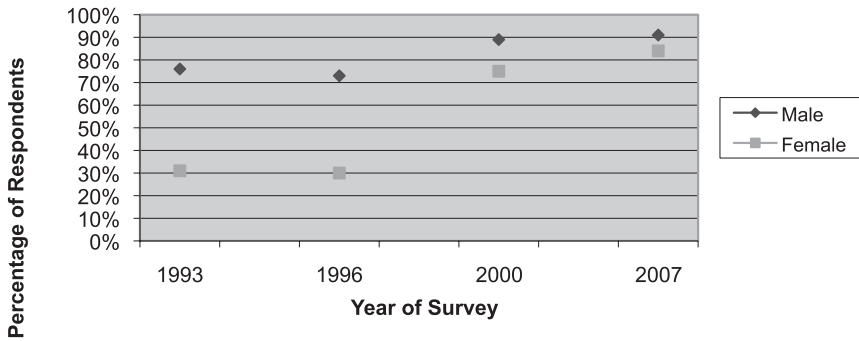


Figure 6.1. Percentage of Adults (Male/Female) Literate in at Least One Language, Segev Shalom.

Sources: 1993, 1996, 2000, 2007 Surveys.

residents under the age of 40, men still are found statistically to be more educated than women ($p=.03$). However, women with high school degrees live in higher income households, regardless of whether they themselves work outside the home or not ($p=.00$). I will return to the role of education in polygynous marriages below.

As for employment, men are far more likely than women to be employed outside the home ($p=.00$). As for the women who do work outside the home, they have a much greater likelihood of working inside Segev Shalom, and not the Jewish sector, than men ($p=.00$), especially women under 40 years of age ($p=.00$). Lastly, women in town who were married were *less* likely to be employed than men who are married ($p=.00$); no such correlation was found among single respondents, however.

Put a different way, married men were more likely to be employed according to the survey findings, while women, once married, are less likely to work outside of the home. And yet, having children in the home does not serve as a predictor for whether a married woman works outside the

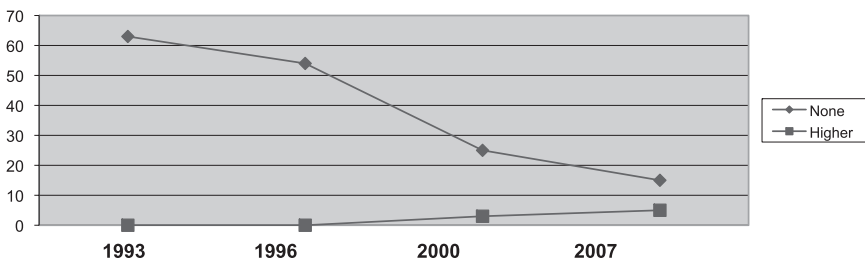


Figure 6.2. Women Accessing Higher Education vs. Those with No Formal Education.

Sources: 1993, 1996, 2000, 2007 Surveys.

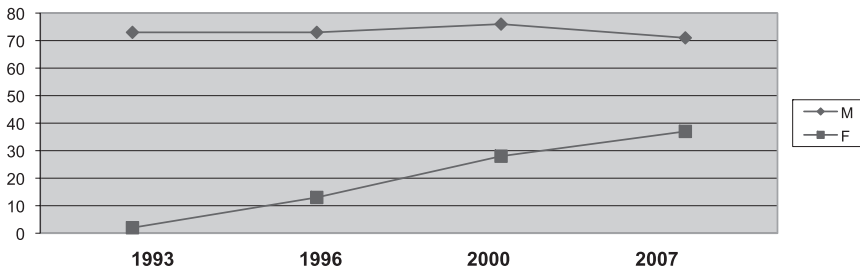


Figure 6.3. Segev Shalom Residents Employed Outside the Home (Male/Female).

Sources: 1993, 1996, 2000, 2007 Surveys.

home. However, the 2007 data did reveal that *men* with small children had a *greater* likelihood ($p=.02$) of being employed than men who did not have small children (this was not found for fathers of older children, however).

Previous studies have shown that employment rates were statistically higher among men in the planned settlements when compared to those living in the unplanned and unrecognized settlements of the *pezurah* (El-Krenawi 2004: 34). The 2007 Segev Shalom and *pezurah* surveys conducted for this study do not fully confirm this argument, however. While it is confirmed that unemployment is higher in the *pezurah* overall as El-Krenawi contends (2004: 61), data collected for this study were only able to statically verify the greater likelihood of women living in the planned towns engaging in some sort of wage labor ($p=.02$). Male employment rates did not vary significantly between the two settlement areas according to the data, at least for this study.

New Veiling and Polygynous Marriage— Retrenchment, Empowerment or Both?

As I noted previously: “improvements in women’s lives rely as much upon male attitudes and expectations as upon the women themselves. Women’s empowerment will remain hindered so long as male bedouin resettlers remain reticent to cooperate and support the women’s development program efforts” (Dinero 1997: 258–259). Over the past two decades, it is apparent that two processes are under way that have major ramifications for the lives of the resettled Negev bedouin woman. On the one hand, the development indices shown above are indisputable. Bedouin women today are more educated, literate, and in many instances, are now working outside of the home in record numbers.

Some bedouin women, mostly the young, now drive, something that was not seen as recently as the late 1990s. In effect, women today are exercising a degree of independence and mobility that allows them literally and figuratively to chart the course of their own lives, something that was unheard of when this study was initiated. As Kher El-Baz, a social worker who knows the community well, puts it, “Ten years ago [in the late 1990s] men and women would never be seen sitting together in meetings in Be’er Sheva. Now this is happening all the time. It’s just hard to believe” (3 June 2007).

Perhaps of greatest significance from a Western perspective, the fertility rate in bedouin society is slowly but steadily dropping—from 9 children per woman in 2003 to 7.6 children in 2005—the largest drop in fertility rates recorded in the country (“Statistics bureau reports...,” 14 January 2008). Not only is this a signifier to feminists that women’s lives are “improving,” but it is also a confirmation of the scholarly literature and its contention that, over time, the resettlement initiative would “create modernity” in the Negev bedouin sector as the rationale for bearing numerous children diminished (Meir 1997: 40, 122).

And yet, concomitant with these developments are trends that appear to be equally strong and of equal relevance, namely, the embracing of what much of the Western feminist literature might define as a retrenchment of bedouin women’s social development. A strengthening, if not rising, level of polygynous practice (see Abu-Rabia et al. 2008), increasingly numbers of women donning the veil (in full *hijab* and *niqab*), and related aspects of changes in personal family life suggest that bedouin women today are taking on not so much “traditional” bedouin practices, but, rather, neo-traditional ways in which to interact with the ever-changing social and political landscape in which their lives are a central feature.

These evolving phenomena are an increasingly common development recognized in the literature that suggests that with sedentarization, Middle Eastern bedouin have become increasingly gender-segregated (Cole 2006: 382). As Abu-Rabia-Queder notes, post-nomadic women throughout the Middle East and North Africa have experienced similar levels of lost freedom of movement, such as the Awlad Ali of northwest Egypt (2006: 8). Awlad Ali bedouin women do not perceive that this change, such as the expectation that they must now veil more than in the past, is *forced* upon them by anyone, least of all by men (Abu-Lughod 1986: 159). Part of the rationale behind the need for greater levels of veiling in town simply extends from the fact that there is a greater likelihood (far less prevalent in the nomadic environment) that a woman, once outside of her stone house, might encounter kin and non-kin males in whose presence modesty is expected (Dinero 1997: 255).

In effect, modesty dress in the geographically concentrated and dense bedouin environment allows women to move about more freely. Moreover, “they can’t be recognized, it provides total anonymity” (Goren, 7 May 2007). The *hijab* and *niqab* provide a “portable tent” of sorts to sedentarized bedouin women, extending their mobility beyond the limits of the four walls of their homes. Hanna Papanek used the term “portable seclusion” several years ago when referring to modesty dress (as noted in Abu-Lughod 2002); it is my purpose here to alter this verbiage in order to suggest that *hijab* does not keep bedouin women “back,” as “seclusion” may suggest, but rather, allows them to step forward in order to move about freely in urbanized bedouin society and, increasingly, in Jewish Israeli society as well.

Thus, the *hijab* can be seen as a small but essential response to globalization and Westernization (Macleod 1991), and the forces that it is presently bringing to bear, socially, culturally, economically, and politically, upon bedouin society. In an age of the Internet, satellite dish television, and the compressed time and space created by these and other transportation and communications technologies, the proximity of outside influences at times can be overwhelming. As Goren, a Segev Shalom social worker for decades, summarizes the situation well (7 May 2007):

The youth no longer fear being shunned by the family. They don’t value the rules and traditions. So in the past, the boys would go looking for Jews, Russians [for “inappropriate” purposes]. Now they will approach bedouin girls.

They are all watching TV now, and they have cell phones. I knew an adolescent girl who was totally veiled. She lived in the *pezurah* [near Segev]. But she had a cell phone, and she would talk with strange men. This is what is happening now, they think about sex and drugs. She would watch “Sex in the City” on her television. In time, she was murdered. They never found her body, or who did it. So here they are sitting in the middle of no where, but they have “New York” in their tents.

Saeed El-Harumi, Segev Shalom *Rosh Ha'Moatzah*, offers a similar anecdote with a less violent outcome (28 May 2007): “In Segev Shalom there was a girl, maybe 18 or 19 years old. She wore short sleeves and skirts, not dressing modestly. Now she is 29, and still no one will marry her. Do you see? There are some [basic] rules that everyone must follow.”

El-Harumi adds, however, that the trends he sees toward increasing levels of veiling in Segev Shalom, most especially since the late 1990s, are also a reflection of changing signs of fashion that can be seen in any small community. “The [dark black] *abaya* that you are seeing here today, for

example, is what they see on the *haj*. They bring it back with them; it is not [originally part of] bedouin culture, it is Saudi culture” (28 May 2007).

Throughout Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and much of the Arab Muslim Middle East as well as Europe, donning the *hijab* is in many instances a fashion statement more than, or at least in addition to, its being an affirmation of one’s religious convictions (“In vogue, hijab style,” 30 June 2007). In other words, while donning *hijab* has in the past been viewed as something intended to discourage drawing attention to one’s appearance, a trend is under way in which some women are using this indigenous form of clothing to express themselves both as respectable and honorable daughters of the *umma* (Arabic: Muslim community), but also as an expression of themselves as individuals with their own personal identities.

As I noted previously (see Dinero 2006: 886), scholars have interpreted the meanings and purposes surrounding the donning of the *hijab* and similar “traditional” practices in a multiplicity of ways that need not be repeated here. Further, I have argued that: “polygynous marriage, veiling, and other Muslim family observances have long been viewed by Western feminists as signs of patriarchy, male control and oppression. Some of the recent literature, however, suggests that Western feminists’ views of these behaviors are themselves Orientalist in nature. Rather than signifying female subjugation, such practices in the post-colonial era can, these authors argue, express anti-Western or anti-imperialist values and ideals” (2006: 883).

And yet, while this remains my belief, a proviso is now in order, for such views are themselves embedded with Western or class bias. It is one thing for the outside, formally schooled observer to academicize a topic such as polygyny, for example, and quite another to hear and feel the pain experienced by one’s friends as they struggle with the reality that another wife is about to enter into their family structure, irretrievably impacting their relationship with their spouse. In other words, I seek here to better situate bedouin women’s changing worlds somewhere between the Western feminist’s “oppression narrative” (Abu-Lughod 2002) and the empowerment narrative I sketched out previously, by listening to and incorporating the perspectives of several women from Segev Shalom about the neo-traditional developments now occurring in their community.

Rather than to try to speculate from above about what resettled bedouin women think about polygyny, increasing levels of veiling, and other changes now occurring in Segev Shalom (and throughout the bedouin community), I initiated the creation of two Bedouin Women’s Focus Groups (BWFG), which were held in Segev Shalom on 9 and 29 May 2007. Ten women were selected for the BWFG from various walks of life, using a snowballing sampling methodology (two were mother and daughter, for example).

The conversations for each session took place in one of the women's homes in the town over tea, coffee, cola, and snacks, and each "officially" lasted two hours. I was present during both sessions, but both were facilitated by a bedouin woman, Amira Abu-Kueider, a non-resident who is bilingual in Arabic and Hebrew. I was not certain if my presence would hamper the discussion or affect it in any way, but quickly found that after a few introductory moments, the women carried on as if I was not in the room. In both instances, I did in fact leave early; Amira noted afterwards that the discussion continued hours after my departure with little notice of my absence.

The women, all of whom were married, but one, who is divorced, ranged in age from 20 to 54. Some had as much as a high school education plus some college (Rhonda, 31; Fatma, 31) to as little as a second grade education (Wadha A., 50). Sabra, 43, had the most children (eleven); Injut, 28, though married, has no children.

All wear head coverings, though none wear a face veil. When asked about their views of the new veiling now taking place in Segev Shalom, there were nearly as many reactions and rationale for donning the veil as there were women in the room. Delal, 37, Rhonda, and Sabra said that they believe that modesty dress is an indicator or a reflection of one's religiosity and is a founding principle of Islam. Houla, 20, stated that she felt it was simply a fashion statement and nothing more. Wadha A. suggested that modesty dress is simply "traditional" dress worn because of custom; Injut concurred, but then added, "but that's also connected to being a Muslim." Fatma added that, "[*hijab*] makes our lives here easier—I put on *hijab* and I can go anywhere."

Interestingly, the attitudes toward veiling did not appear to follow any particular generation pattern. Wardha, 30, for example, called the new veiling "a beautiful thing; it's fine." Iman, 28, responded that, "I support the women who are now taking on the full *hijab* [i.e., black *abaya* including *niqab*; see Illustration 6.3]—though I wouldn't do it personally." But perhaps the strongest opinion on the subject came from Wadha B., the 54 year old divorcee who, when married, was the first wife in a polygynous family with two co-wives. Wadha B. did not graduate high school, but she did study until the ninth grade. She is the mother of five children, and she has lived in Segev Shalom for fifteen years, having moved there from the neighboring Azazmeh region. She states: "I don't like this change, and no, I do not support what is happening. There is nothing in the Qur'an that requires this!"

While an increase in the donning of modesty dress can easily be observed, if not documented per se, simply by walking down the streets of Segev Shalom or spending time in the central marketplace, polygynous marriage is more easily quantified. Of those household representatives who stated in 1996* that they were married, 31 percent were living in a

polygynous household (N=95). In 2000, this number remained essentially unchanged, dipping slightly to 29 percent (N=119). According to the 2007 survey results, this figure rose slightly to 32 percent (N=214), that is, one-third of the households in town. It is statistically lower than the figure determined in the neighboring *pezurah* however, where nearly half, 48 per-



Illustration 6.3. One of Many Young Women who don Full *Abaya* and *Niqab* in the Streets of Segev Shalom—2007.

Source: Photo by Steven C. Dinero.

cent of the survey respondents, were living in polygynous households in 2007 ($p=.04$).

Thus, sedentarization has not led to the elimination of polygyny in the Negev and, in truth, it has served to provide much of the impetus for it as the desire for larger families with more children increasingly informs social behavior (Abu-Rabia et al. 2008: 33). Among other bedouin communities in the Arab Middle East, settlement has correlated with an increase in polygynous marriage as well (Cole 2006: 383). A substantial literature has developed on the bedouin of the Negev alone, much of it sharply critical of the fact that polygynous marriage is yet thriving, despite the fact that it is, according to many authors, a “dysfunctional” marital system, with varying levels of harm inflicted upon the co-wives, children, and even husbands of the families involved.

El-Krenawi, for example, contends that in general, polygynous families in the Negev must worry more about food security than monogamous families (2004: 39). His work with Slonim-Nevo also traces a great deal of familial stress to home economics, that is, to the belief that the economic situation is better for monogamous families overall, as is a higher rate of employment for husbands in monogamous families (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 41). In their sample, though monogamous men were more likely to be employed, this was not found to be statistically significant (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 47). (This was the same situation found in the 2007 Segev Shalom sample.) In their sample, too, polygynous men reported feeling slightly better about their economic situations than monogamous men (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 47); this was found to be the case of Segev Shalom where the polygynous families with higher incomes outnumbered the monogamous by a few percentage points (23.1 percent vs. 20.5) as well as in the *pezurah* (30 percent vs. 23 percent). In neither case was this difference found to be statistically significant, however.

Overall, these authors contend that there are more conflictual relationships and disagreements in polygynous families than in monogamous families (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 71). Thus, they assert that arguments between wives, and between children and other co-wives who are not their mothers, are common (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 43). And yet, more wives in polygynous marriages feel that their husbands do not discriminate amongst his wives than they feel that he does discriminate (36 percent vs. 41 percent; El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 43). Two-thirds of the men in El-Krenawi’s and Slonim-Nevo’s study reported that they do not believe that they discriminate among their co-wives (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 50).

Still, what is key to their study is that the ability of the family to function well falls upon the women, most especially their sense of well-being, their

economic status, and so on. “Women in polygamous families and women whose families’ economic situation is tough report more problematic family functioning” (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 62). That is, polygynous families function best when economic resources are readily available, when these resources are equitably shared, and when a spirit of cooperation, and not competition, informs the relationships among and between a husband, his co-wives, and their respective children. And given that more often than not, such resources appear to be scarce at best, such families, most especially women and children, are, they contend, likely to “suffer a great deal of difficulty” (El-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2003: 72).

Elbedour et al. (2002) are less willing to jump on the “polygyny is obviously bad for women” bandwagon. They also note that a number of “risk factors” associated with polygyny prevail—marital conflict, marital distress, and the absence of the father in the home being the primary causes of concern (Elbedour et al. 2002: 258–259). They also suggest that financial distress often exists in polygynous families, and that a relationship can be seen between polygyny and poverty (Elbedour et al. 2002: 260).

And yet, it is their contention that part of what is often left out of the calculus when evaluating polygyny is the role of culture in a given society. “In communities where the practice of polygamy is valued and frequently practiced, no negative stigma prevails, which, in turn, may provide a buffer from the adverse stressors associated with polygamous marriage” (Elbedour et al. 2002: 265). As I have argued elsewhere (Dinero 2006), the literature is replete with a variety of studies from throughout the Middle East, northern and sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere, all of which offers counterarguments to the contention that polygyny is economically stressful to the family structure. On the contrary, such families, as will be seen below in the case of Segev Shalom, represent not the weakest and poorest among a community, but rather, the wealthiest and the most powerful.

Socially, on the other hand, polygynous marriage is becoming increasingly problematic for Israel’s Negev bedouin women. As women become more educated and more familiar with alternative lifestyles, they are less receptive and willing to accept certain impositions upon them that they feel may unjustly limit or jeopardize their freedoms, individuality, power, or quality of life. Social Worker Goren explains (7 May 2007):

I think the women themselves [now] see polygamy as oppressive. This is new. In the past, other wives were seen as extra help. It was very functional. Today, there is jealousy—who is the favorite—each wants their own house and things, and men find it hard to support each equally, as Islam demands. This is especially true for the poorer men.

Bedouin men marry very young because the marriages are arranged. When they are older, they find someone they actually love; they choose for themselves. *Some* of the violence—and I wish to be careful here—could even be connected to this early marriage.

Goren's views on the relationship between arranged and love marriage echo Ben-David's words on the topic some years back (as cited in Dinero 2006: 908). The quantitative and qualitative data gathered in Segev Shalom sheds further light on this issue as well, although the relationships between a family's economic status, employment, education of spouses, and marital structure (monogamy versus polygyny) is not so easily unraveled.

According to the previous data gathered in Segev Shalom, polygyny correlated most strongly with time spent living in the town, age, employment status, income, and political party identification. Early findings (Dinero 1996) suggested that polygynous Azazmeh tended to be some of the least educated, poorest residents in the town; polygynous Tarabeen, however, tended to be wealthier, with religious motivations informing, at least in part, the rationale behind their polygynous marriage choice. Those identifying as "bedouin" were more likely than any others to be part of a polygynous household.

The 2000 data added to this profile. Education and literacy were primary correlates once again, as were two economic elements, the raising of crops and animals. As for identity, however, those preferring the "Israeli" moniker or related versions ("Israeli Muslim," "Muslim Israeli," and so on) were *least* likely to be part of a polygynous household.

The 2007 data added a rich, full, and varied complement of significant factors to these findings. Much of the data confirms previous findings while some is in direct contradiction, suggesting that the community is yet in flux and that as the town grows, attitudes have shifted—and will likely continue to shift—as residents' social and economic circumstances evolve.

Overall, it can first be said that age is a—perhaps *the*—definitive factor in distinguishing polygynous marriages from monogamous ones in Segev Shalom, where older residents are far more likely to have two or more wives than younger residents ($p=.00$). This was especially true among poorer residents ($p=.00$). Wealthier families who are also polygynous tended to be members of the Azazmeh tribe, and not Tarabeen ($p=.03$).

Polygynous families in town now are more likely to have lived in the town the *longest* ($p=.00$); this may suggest that these are the same families who came to the town over a decade ago with certain social values, but that the younger generation is less likely to share these values. Again, this was especially true of those with lower incomes ($p=.00$), most especially

members of the Azazmeh tribe ($p=.01$)—i.e., the founding fathers and co-mothers of Segev Shalom.

The 2007 data suggested that overall, the polygynous are less educated ($p=.03$), especially those with lower incomes ($p=.02$). Polygynous Tarabeen have less education than those Tarabeen with more education ($p=.03$). Polygyny correlates with being less literate ($p=.01$), especially among the poorer town residents ($p=.00$). The Azazmeh who are polygynous are especially likely also to be illiterate ($p=.02$).

The data confirm that socially, the polygynous families of Segev Shalom tend to be less educated, less literate, and older than the rest of the town residents. Economically, too, the data suggests that the bedouin are beginning to follow a model in which polygyny correlates with the weaker attributes of today's changing bedouin community, rather than its strengths.

Similar to the previous findings, polygynous residents in 2007 were more likely than the other residents to own animals ($p=.01$), especially those with low incomes ($p=.00$). The polygynous were more likely to raise crops ($p=.05$), also most especially those with low incomes ($p=.04$).

Interestingly, those who are polygynous are less likely to own various material goods, such as a telephone ($p=.01$). This was especially true of the Tarabeen ($p=.03$), who, as above, differ from the Azazmeh in a variety of social and economic arenas. Polygynous residents were less likely to own a satellite dish ($p=.05$), especially the Azazmeh ($p=.03$) and those under the age of 40 ($p=.03$). Polygynous households were also less likely to own a washing machine ($p=.03$), especially members of the Tarabeen tribe ($p=.03$). Lastly, the polygynous families with low incomes were less likely to own a VCR/DVD player ($p=.00$), especially members of the Azazmeh tribe ($p=.04$).

Needless to say, the ownership of these goods is, in and of itself, of no particular academic interest. But given that these items each comprise small components of the developmental enterprise, their ownership (or lack thereof) offers an indication of general economic success or deprivation among polygynous bedouin families. And yet, for the most part, these are luxury/non-essential items; no correlation was found, for example, between refrigerator ownership and marriage type.

Although these various factors offer a variety of aspects of polygynous activity and behavior in the town, the strongest predictors of polygyny found were not income, education/literacy, tribe, or signs of material wealth. Rather, the strongest predictors (after age), using multivariate linear stepwise regression (SPSS 13.0), was years living in the town ($p=.009$) and animal ownership ($p=.041$). Those bedouin living in the town the longest were the most likely to be polygynous; these tend to be older residents, of course, who, one could argue, most reluctantly came to the town.

They are holding onto behaviors such as polygyny and livestock rearing because these are the signifying elements of bedouinism, of nomadism, and of who it is/was to be a Negev bedouin. Bedouin men who seek additional wives do so because of and despite the economic stresses it places on the family unit as a whole, for, ultimately, the *social* value of taking on a second (or third or fourth) wife far outweighs the economic costs that such families often experience.

And for many bedouin men, most especially the Azazmeh of Segev Shalom, taking on a second wife is simply a sign of economic success, a “trophy wife” as it were, that signifies one’s position and status that one strives to attain within the bedouin community. As is found in some circumstances in the West, not all bedouin men, given the economic circumstances of the towns (let alone the *pezurah*), are presently in a situation where they can truly afford the expenses associated with conspicuous consumption—and yet social forces press them to pursue the option nonetheless.

It was conveyed to me anecdotally that bedouin women today are “far more demanding” and have higher expectations than in the past. Prospective wives, particularly those who have a *teudat zehut* (Hebrew: identity card proving they are Israeli citizens and, thus, one does not have to go through the challenges and difficulties of bringing a wife into Israel from Jordan (Parizot 2004) or the Palestinian Territories (Goren 2007), have a great number of material wants, and are simply less willing to live in the *pezurah* when they now have the town option.

Discussions during the BWFG sessions concerning life in the *pezurah*, and attitudes toward polygyny in general, confirm this contention. Of the ten women in the group, three had come from Jordan, one was from Gaza/Palestine (though she had lived in the *pezurah*), one had grown up in Segev Shalom, and the remaining five had moved to the town from the *pezurah*.

In general, views of life in the *pezurah* were pragmatic and, for the most part, not very positive. Rhonda, who moved to the town from Jordan eleven years ago, stated that: “in the town it’s better than outside. We have electricity and water. We are protected from the weather.” Iman, who came from Jordan two years later, added: “I prefer the town to the desert. Everything is possible here for the children. There are schools, etc.” And Fatma, who came to Segev Shalom from Jordan 10 years ago, concurred: “It’s easier living in town. We have schools, stores, clinics, things we need here.” Injut, who grew up in town and so has never lived in the *pezurah*, but, like the other women in the group, has many relatives who do, offered that: “Women are better off in the town because here we have access to all the conveniences of daily life.”

Those who actually had lived in the *pezurah* offered differing views about their lives there. Sabra, who has lived in town for seventeen years,

stated that: "I lived in the *pezurah* for ten years. It was very difficult for me there. It is much better living here." Added Wardha, who has lived in town for eight years: "I too lived for eight years in the *pezurah*. It was difficult to wash clothes, to cook, everything. In the town there are services, things we need. Everything for daily life is here."

And yet not all of the women who had actually lived in the *pezurah* spoke about the experience in negative terms. Still, it appears that those who spoke positively about the *pezurah* tended to be older women who spoke in nostalgic, less pragmatic terms about their day-to-day lives there. Offered Delal, who has lived in town for thirteen years: "I preferred living in the *pezurah*. There, I could feel free, I could breathe." Wadha B. echoed these sentiments, adding: "In the *pezurah* I felt free. Here in town I feel suffocated." Perhaps Wadha A. expressed the sentiment of many when she concluded that: "outside town we lived a calmer life. But here in town, we can have electricity and the other things we need to live."

When the subject of polygynous marriage in bedouin society was raised, there was some discussion among the women about its role in the community today, but disagreement was far more muted than on any other topic. Only one woman, Delal (age 37), stated that she supports the institution of polygyny, and believes that "it can sometimes serve to benefit the family and community." Wadha B., who has lived in Segev Shalom for twenty years and is the daughter of a prominent Azazmeh sheikh who has a number of wives and children, was willing to offer that, "if there is a 'reason,' well OK, but otherwise, no I don't accept it!" Added Houla: I don't support it, except under 'special circumstances.'" While the question of what these "reasons" or "circumstances" might be was not directly referred to at first, as the discussion continued for some time, Sabra finally exclaimed, "OK, this is acceptable, but only in special situations, such as when a woman is barren."

Still, the rest of the women in the group were unanimous in their animus toward polygynous marriage. Injut stated that: "I don't like [polygyny], this I just don't accept." Rhonda agreed, adding that, "this has nothing to do with being religious." Some women in the BWFG went a step further, not only questioning the value of polygynous marriage, but, in fact, condemning it outright. Wadha A, the former first wife, said that, "I see this as a 'blemish,' a wound upon our society." Fatma and Wardha went further, both stating at various times during the conversation that, "I don't believe in this at all—it's forbidden!"

But perhaps Iman summarized the issue in the most telling way. She is 28 years old and has a ninth grade education. She is the mother of six children and was, for two years, a first wife until her husband divorced the second co-wife. When the issue of polygyny was raised, she spoke up im-

mediately. “I am against it,” she stated without hesitation. “In fact I think the Christians have it right: one woman, one man. That’s it!”

There was a momentary silence in the room and then the sound of stifled gulps of air. Everyone took quick sips of their tea.

Conclusions

I wish to conclude this chapter by echoing the sentiment of Abu-Lughod (2002), Abu-Rabia-Queder (2006), and others who state that observers must not accept the idea that feminism and the rights of women are Western concepts to be viewed in opposition to Islam and its nationalist virtues. An analysis of the present-day developments in the Negev suggests that the contested space of gender is developing into an area of tension and conflict in the regime within which the bedouin must negotiate, interact, arbitrate, and above all else, survive. The above findings, in particular the material culled from the focus groups and informal discussions, reveals that if there is one issue that signifies a red flag for future difficulty and conflict within Negev bedouin society and culture, it is the ever-evolving role of the sedentarized bedouin woman.

The resettled woman of the Negev today is at the crossroads of bedouin society, bridging the worlds of the tent and the town, the *pezurah* and Segev Shalom, the world of their grandmothers and the world of their daughters. These are geographies of honor, modesty, and seclusion, and simultaneously and concomitantly, geographies of globalization, open borders, and interactions with the Jewish, urban, settled consumerist cultures and societies within which they are now so permanently situated and entrenched.

On the one hand, there are now more opportunities available to bedouin women in the Negev than ever before in the areas of education and employment; on the other, many bedouin men—fathers, brothers, uncles—have never felt more fearful, more vulnerable, or more insecure as the role of the bedouin woman changes so quickly before their very eyes. States Segev Shalom Social Services Director El-Baz states (3 June 2007):

This community is changing so rapidly, perhaps most especially in the past ten years. I don’t like how the community has dealt with women’s issues, or with kids or the elderly. I think it’s happening too fast ... Our mistake is that we want our community to become Western in two days ... but it’s a process. [But here] it’s random, not really planned. Our role [in providing social services in Segev Shalom] is to facilitate change, to develop services for this change—but are these top down or grass roots? Well it’s both, it’s confusion.

The changes then, which are manifest in the daily lives of the sedentarized Negev bedouin woman, largely mirror the changes manifest in the community as a whole. These changes in many ways serve as the bellwether for the bedouin community; as bedouin women's roles evolve, so does the entire society, and its future social and economic development along with it.

NOTE

*Reliable data is unavailable from the 1993 survey.